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DIAMOND

THE UNREAL HATE FOR HARDIK PANDYA

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

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Cricket today

There is no end to Hardik Pandya's booing in the Indian Premier League. The Mumbai Indians captain is paying a heavy price for leaving Gujarat Titans and replacing Rohit as skipper. I don't think Hardik has done anything wrong as it was the call of the franchise and he agreed to it. However, the situation could have been better handled by the management and the owners of the Mumbai Indians, but they chose to ignore it. Their casual approach has put Hardik in a spot of bother, with fans leaving no chance to go after him in the games. The emotions of Gujarat Titans fans are understandable, considering they invested a lot in the franchise and trusted Hardik, who was there for two seasons. However, other than that, the mocking and trolling don't paint a nice picture. Pandya needs the backing and support from all quarters if MI wants to win another title; otherwise, the ongoing edition will leave many painful memories. On Hardik's part, I have seen him trying to ignore the noise, but he is feeling uncomfortable deep inside. Taking a catch, scoring runs, or dismissing a batter doesn't get you applauds from the stand; you are forced to think, what wrong have I done? He is feeling alone and down, and it's time fans leave him. He will play a crucial role for India in the ICC T20 World Cup, and the team needs its star performer in top form rather than sulking about what's happening in the Indian Premier League. Rohit Sharma and Jasprit Bumrah, the two senior members of the squad, should give him their unconditional support. After all, he is the skipper of one of the most successful franchises in the tournament. Meanwhile, it's raining record in the league. Virat Kohli is backing among runs and is scripting records in every game. Although RCB have won just one out of three matches, Virat has been their top scorer. He was away from cricket for months to attend the birth of his second child and returned on time for the Indian Premier League. His performance with the bat will decide whether he will travel to West Indies and the USA for the World Cup in June. Andre Russell is another player who has hit the ground running. The Kolkata Knight Riders' ace contributes with the bat and ball, making KKR a challenging unit for the opposite numbers. In other sports, nations are getting ready for the European Cup, and there will be pressure on the defending champions of Italy. They failed to qualify for the last edition of the FIFA World Cup, and the powerhouse nation needs success to make its presence felt again. Enjoy the action-packed edition of Cricket Today.

The Mumbai Indians captain is paying a heavy price for leaving Gujarat Titans and replacing Rohit as skipper

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WHAT'S HOT & NOT

VIRAT KOHLI

He followed his 77 with a 59-ball knock that anchored Bengaluru to 182-6 on a two-paced pitch that became easier to bat on later. Kohli raised his second successive half-century off 36 balls, but it only helped Bengaluru to a par score against Kolkata Knight Riders. His 83 runs came off 59 balls, laced with 4 fours and as many sixes.

KWENA MAPHAKA

The 17-year-old South African fast bowler Kwena Maphaka made his IPL debut with expensive figures of 0-66. He hit for fours and sixes as Hyderabad batters dominated the pacers from the onset. Travis Head went after him and didn't allow the U-19 World Cup hero to settle down at the Rajiv Gandhi International Cricket Stadium.

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VENKATESH IYER

Venkatesh Iyer played some exquisite pull shots and used his feet well in a 75-run stand with Shreyas Iyer to seal the game. Ventakesh offered a straightforward catch to Kohli at deep midwicket soon after his 50 off 30 with four sixes and three fours against the Royal Challengers Bengaluru in the 17th season of IPL.

JONNY BAIRSTOW

In an eventful first over bowled by Sam Curran, Jonny Bairstow couldn't hold onto a sharp overhead catch at first slip off the second ball Virat Kohli faced. The RCB opener went on to score 77 runs and played a part in his team's win over Punjab Kings, but Bairstow's mistake was the reason behind the defeat of the Punjab Kings.

SUNIL NARINE

Kolkata opening batters Sunil Narine, playing his 500th Twenty20, and Phil Salt made a rocket start of 85 in the power play against RCB. They reached a winning 186-3 with 3.1 overs to spare. Narine, 47 off 22, smashed five sixes and two fours and was named the Player of the Match for his all-round effort. He took 1 wicket as well.

SHUBMAN GILL

Gujarat captain Shubman Gill made a five-ball eight before he played Deepak Chahar (2-28) across the line and was out plumb leg before wicket in the third over of a tall chase against the Chennai Super Kings. Gill hasn't shown his class in the first two games of the tournament's ongoing season.

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MISTIMED DIVE: Trent Boult tries unsuccessfully to catch Tristan Stubbs' during the Indian Premier League cricket match between Delhi Capitals and Rajasthan Royals in Jaipur.

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TIME TO SHAKE LEGS: Cheer girls dance during the Indian Premier League cricket match between Sunrisers Hyderabad and Mumbai Indians in Hyderabad.

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TOP EFFORT: Mayank Agarwal jumps in the air to stop a sixer during the Indian Premier League cricket tournament between Sunrisers Hyderabad and Mumbai Indians.

BANG BANG: SunrisersHeinrich Klaasen plays a big shot during the Indian Premier League cricket 2024. He was in sensational form against Mumbai Indians.

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RETURN OF KING: Royal Challengers Bengaluru's Virat Kohli hits a six during the Indian Premier League cricket match against Punjab Kings in Bengaluru.

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CELEBRATION TIME: Ferrari driver Carlos Sainz of Spain sprays champagne after winning the Australian Formula One Grand Prix at Albert Park in Melbourne.

Cricket Buzz

"He has become a household name in Kerala"

- Sanju Samson hails Team India's future star Riyan Parag

BOLD PREDICTION ABOUT VIRAT KOHLI

Mohammad Kaif has made a bold prediction about Virat Kohli. He said Virat will open the batting with Rohit Sharma or Yashasvi Jaiswal in the ICC T20 World Cup 2024. The former India captain is often slammed for his strike rate in the shortest format of the game, and if the reports are to be believed, the team management doesn't want him in the team for the World Cup in the West Indies and the United States of America. However, Kaif hit back at the criticism, saying that Virat will be unstoppable in the remaining matches of the IPL 2024, and he will play for the Men in Blue in the global event. "Rohit Sharma and Yashasvi Jaiswal will not be the opening paid for India in the World Cup; One of them will pair with Virat Kohli. Virat will open the innings for the Indian team," he said on Star Sports.

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"England are not saving Test cricket but doing marketing and PR by their Bazball approach"

- R Ashwin shows a mirror to Ben Stokes' team

BIG NAMES DROPPED FROM THE CONTRACT LIST.

Cricket Australia named the list of players for central contracts of 2024. CA shared the list of 23 players who bagged the contract but shockingly dropped several high-profile players. Power hitter Marcus Stoinis was one of the big names to miss out on the contract. Meanwhile, David Warner, who retired from Tests and ODIs, also failed to secure a contract. Other players to be absent from the list are Ashton Agar, Marcus Harries, and Michael Neser. Warner's exclusion is understandable as the left-hand opener is likely to leave the T20I format as well after the T20 World Cup 2024 in June. However, Stoinis is struggling with the form, which is why he was left out of the contract. With the emergence of T20 leagues around the world, several prominent players have given up their contracts to feature as freelance cricketers.

PREITY ZINTA'S HEART-WINNING GESTURE

Former England all-rounder Ravi Bopara shared a cherished memory from his time with the Indian Premier League franchise Punjab Kings. He joined the Punjab-based team, then known as Kings XI Punjab, in 2009 and played for them for two seasons. Bopara reminisced about the 2009 IPL edition, which was held in South Africa due to elections in India. He played 15 matches for Punjab Kings, scoring 346 runs, including three half-centuries, and taking five wickets. "At the beginning of the IPL, it was like a celebration, those days were fantastic," Bopara said on FanCode's IPL show 'The Super Over.' "The most memorable moment, besides winning and achieving my highest score, was when Preity Zinta personally cooked parathas for me."

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JUNAID KHAN CRITICIZES IPL

The T20 leagues all over the world are in favour of the batter, and IPL is no exception. The tournament saw the highest score being posted in the match between Sunrisers Hyderabad and Mumbai Indians. It didn't go down well with former Pakistan pacer Junaid Khan, who mocked and questioned the quality of the best T20 league in the world. IPL has also given close encounters over the years. Meanwhile, SRH posted 277/3 after being invited to bat first by MI captain Hardik Pandya. The actual acceleration came from Heinrich Klaasen, who struck an unbeaten 80 off 34 balls. Chasing the record total, Mumbai posted 246/5. Junaid, who was one of the best left-arm pacers during his playing days, took to X to make fun of the IPL. "Flat pitches, small boundaries, quick outfield. This is called IPL A target of 278," he wrote.

YASHASVI JAISWAL WILL FAIL

Yashasvi Jaiswal has been magnificent for India in Test cricket. He scored more than 700 runs in the five-match Test series against England and was named the Player of the Series. He hit two double-hundreds and was India's best batter. However, according to many experts, his real test will be in Australia and England. The sub-content team will play five Test in Australia later this year. The southpaw was a walking wicket in the two Test matches he played in South Africa. However, his teammate R Ashwin said that Jaiswal has all the tools to succeed in Australia and any other country. 'Yashasvi will face challenges against Australia, and he will fail as well. The important thing will be how he picks himself up after failures. He has all the tools to succeed in Australia," he said.

COVER STORY

IS THE BOOING AND HACKLING OF MI CAPTAIN HARDIK PANDYA UNFAIR?

In the vivid ongoings of cricketing sagas, the resurgence of Hardik Pandya amidst the fervour of IPL 2024 illuminates a narrative fraught with intrigue and expectation. Departing Mumbai Indians (MI) in 2022 to helm the Gujarat Titans, Pandya's tenure as captain...

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BY CT CONTRIBUTOR

In the vivid ongoings of cricketing sagas, the resurgence of Hardik Pandya amidst the fervour of IPL 2024 illuminates a narrative fraught with intrigue and expectation. Departing Mumbai Indians (MI) in 2022 to helm the Gujarat Titans, Pandya's tenure as captain with the new franchise was etched with triumphs that resonated across the cricketing landscape. However, his return to the MI fold, this time as captain, elicited a maelstrom of emotions—eliciting both fervent anticipation and lingering controversy. As the fever of the IPL season unfolds, a dissonant chorus of boos and unwelcoming gestures has underscored Pandya's initial matches with MI.

Yet, beyond the clamour of dissent lies a more profound story—a narrative that beckons introspection and a nuanced understanding. In navigating the fairness of these boos directed towards Pandya, it becomes imperative to unravel the tapestry of his return, the legacy he carries, and the aspirations he embodies—transcending mere pursuits of victory or financial gain.

Let's talk about the context surrounding Hardik Pandya's return and the circumstances that have led to this contentious reception. Having left MI in 2022 to lead the Gujarat Titans as their captain, Pandya's tenure with the new franchise was marked by notable achievements. Under his leadership, the Titans clinched the IPL trophy in 2022 and reached the finals the following year. However, MI, the five-time IPL champions, faced stiff competition from the Chennai Super Kings (CSK), who closed the gap by securing victories in 2021 and 2023, matching MI's illustrious record.

Pandya's return to MI, this time as captain, was anticipated with both excitement and scepticism. His appointment meant stepping into the shoes of Rohit Sharma, the revered Indian cricketer, and five-time IPL winner, who had led MI with distinction. Understandably, this transition stirred emotions among fans, some of whom expressed their discontent through vocal disapproval during MI's early matches.

But is it fair to subject Pandya to such treatment? Let's consider the facts. Pandya's return to MI signifies a homecoming for the all-rounder, a chance to rekindle the magic of his earlier days with the franchise. His track record as a successful captain with the Gujarat Titans speaks volumes about his leadership abilities and cricketing acumen. Rather than vilify him for this move, fans should celebrate his decision to return to the team where he made his mark.

Furthermore, the two defeats suffered by MI in the

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initial matches should not overshadow Pandya's potential to turn the tide. Cricket, by its very nature, is a game of uncertainties where fortunes can change in an instant. With Pandya at the helm, MI has a leader who has proven himself capable of guiding his team through challenging situations. The resilience displayed by champions often emerges from setbacks, and it would be premature to dismiss MI's prospects based on early results.

Beyond the realm of the IPL, Pandya's return to MI holds broader implications for Indian cricket. In a landscape where leadership roles are fiercely contested, his captaincy stint could bolster his case for leading the national team. The examples of players like Sanju Samson, Shreyas Iyer, and others who have captained IPL franchises but are yet to cement their place in the Indian T20 squad underscore the significance of captaincy credentials. Pandya's leadership stint with MI could serve as a launching pad for greater responsibilities on the international stage.

It's crucial to dispel any notion that Hardik Pandya's return to Mumbai Indians is solely driven by financial gains. While player transfers and trades are common in the IPL, Pandya's decision to rejoin MI transcends monetary considerations. His deep-rooted connection to the franchise, coupled with a genuine desire to contribute to its success, underscores his commitment to the team's cause. Pandya's loyalty and dedication to MI exemplify his passion for the game and his unwavering focus on achieving collective goals rather than mere financial rewards.

Looking ahead, Pandya's return to MI not only enhances the team's chances of reclaiming the IPL trophy but also sets the stage for a fitting conclusion to MS Dhoni's illustrious career. A potential CSK-MI final, with Pandya leading his side against his former mentor, promises to be a spectacle for cricket enthusiasts. Moreover, a successful campaign with MI could solidify Pandya's position as a frontrunner for the captaincy role in the Indian team, marking a significant milestone in his career.

In conclusion, while emotions may run high in the heat of competition, it's imperative to approach the situation with fairness and perspective. Booing Hardik Pandya, a proven match-winner and a loyal servant of Indian cricket, undermines the spirit of sportsmanship and detracts from the essence of the game. Instead, let's rally behind him as he embarks on this new chapter with MI, confident in his ability to lead the team to greater heights. After all, in the game of cricket, as in life, everyone deserves a fair chance to prove their worth. ■

FEATURE

6 MATCHES WITH THE MOST SIXES IN T20 CRICKET

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Sunrisers Hyderabad and Mumbai Indians were involved in a bludgeoning contest where bowlers took a hit on a nicely batting friendly surface at the Rajiv Gandhi International Stadium in Hyderabad. Match number 8 of the Indian Premier League 2024 season...

BY CT CONTRIBUTOR

Sunrisers Hyderabad and Mumbai Indians were involved in a bludgeoning contest where bowlers took a hit on a nicely batting friendly surface at the Rajiv Gandhi International Stadium in Hyderabad. Match number 8 of the Indian Premier League 2024 season saw SRH smash a record 277/3 in 20 overs. SRH broke the record for the highest team total posted in the competition's history. In response, the Mumbai Indians managed 246/5, which is the highest score ever by a team that batted second in an IPL match. For SRH, Travis Head, Abhishek Sharma and Heinrich Klaasen smashed 62, 63 and 80*, respectively. For MI, Tilak Varma scored at the top with 64. Notably, the match saw a record 38 sixes being smashed. It's now the most in a single T20 match. Before this, 33 sixes was the record in an IPL match, and 37 was the record in T20s.

Here, we decode T20 matches with the most six hits.

38 SIXES - SRH vs MI (IPL)

SRH batters slammed a total of 18 sixes versus MI. Australia's Head was at his best. He smashed three maximums in a 24-ball effort. His strike rate was 258.33. Abhishek hit a 16-ball fifty, SRH's fastest in IPL. He ended with a 23-ball 63, smashing seven maximums. Aiden Markram hit 42* from 28 balls. His innings had one six. Klaasen hit his second successive fifty. He struck a 34-ball 80*, slamming seven sixes. Altogether, SRH batters managed 18 sixes.

Mumbai then hit 20 sixes to take the tally to 38 in the match. For MI, Rohit Sharma hit three sixes in a

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12-ball 26. Fellow opener Ishan Kishan hit a 13-ball 34, clobbering four sixes (SR: 261.54). Naman Dhir hit two maximums in a 14-ball 30. Varma slammed six sixes in his 64. Hardik Pandya (1), Tim David (3) and Romario Shepherd (1) also hit sixes.

37 SIXES - BALKH LEGENDS vs KABUL ZWANAN (AFGHANISTAN PREMIER LEAGUE)

In a match between Balkh Legends and Kabul Zwanan in the Afghanistan Premier League in 2018, 37 sixes were hit. Balkh Legends smashed 244/7 in 20 overs before Kabul hit 223/7 to lose by 21 runs. For the legends, Chris Gayle smashed 10 sixes in his 80-run effort. Dilshan Munaweera hit three sixes as Darwish Rasool hit 5 sixes in his 50-run effort. Skipper Mohammad Nabi struck three sixes in his 37 from 15 balls. Mirwais Ashraf clobbered two sixes. In total, the legends hit 23 sixes.

The Kabul franchise hit 14 sixes in their innings, taking the tally to 37. Hazratullah Zazai was the main contributor., He hit seven sixes in his knock of 17-ball 62. The trio of Shahidullah, Colin Ingram and Rashid Khan hit two sixes each. Luke Ronchi managed a single six.

37 SIXES - JAMAICA TALLAWAHS vs ST KITTS AND NEVIS PATRIOTS (CARIBBEAN PREMIER LEAGUE)

In the 2019 edition of the Caribbean Premier League (CPL), the match between Jamaica Tallawahs and St Kitts and Nevis Patriots produced a magnificent game of brutal six-hitting. Jamaica scored 241/4 in 20 overs. Gayle hit a solid 116 for Jamaica. His knock had 10 sixes. Chadwick Walton hit a 36-ball 73. His knock had 8 sixes. Andre Russell (2) and Shamar Springer (1) were the contributors as Jamaica hit 21 maximums.

St Kitts and Nevis Patriots punched their way to 242/6 in 18.5 overs and sealed the contest. The side clobbered 16 sixes in the chase. Devon Thomas hit three sixes in a 40-ball 71. Even Lewis hit six sixes in an 18-ball 53. Laurie Evans hit four sixes in a 20-ball 41. Fabian Allen hit an unbeaten 15-ball 37 (sixes: 2). Lastly, Shamarh Brooks slammed 27 (6s: 1).

36 SIXES - TITANS vs KNIGHTS (CSA T20 CHALLENGE)

In the 2022 edition of the CSA T20 Challenge in South Africa, the Titans hit a sparkling 271/3 in 20 overs. Dewald Brevis entertained the crowd in Potchefstroom with a majestic 162 from 57 balls. His

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knock consisted of 13 fours and 13 sixes (SR: 284.21). Jivesham Pillay hit one six in his 52. Donovan Ferreira hit two sixes in his 15-ball 33. Dayyam Galliem hit one six. In total, the Titans smashed 17 sixes.

The Knights managed a score of 230/9, losing the contest by 41 runs. However, their innings had 19 sixes, taking the match tally to 36. Gihahn Cloette and Jacques Snyman hit five sixes between them in a 72-run opening stand. Patrick Kruger hit 22 from 13 balls (6s: 2). Pite van Viljon (1), Gerald Coetzee (5), Migael Pretorius (3) and Issak Dikgale (3) made useful contributions.

35 SIXES - JAMAICA TALLAWAHS vs TRINBAGO KNIGHT RIDERS (CARIBBEAN PREMIER LEAGUE)

In the 2019 edition of the CPL, the Trinbago Knight Riders managed a big score of 267/2 in 20 overs versus the Tallawahs. 17 sixes were smashed in TKR's innings. Lendl Simmons led the charge with an 86 (6s: 5). Sunil Narine hit 20 (6s: 1). Colin Munro showed his brilliance with an unbeaten 96 from 50 balls. He smashed 8 sixes. Skipper Kieron Pollard joined the party with a 45*-run effort. He smashed three sixes.

In response, Tallawahs could manage 226/5 in their 20 overs. Notably, Tallawahs hit 18 sixes, but that wasn't enough. Gayle hit two sixes in his 24-ball 39. Glenn Phillips hit four sixes in his 62-run knock. The likes of Walton (1), Rovman Powell (1), George Worker (2), Janelle Glenn (3), Derval Green (1) and Ramaal Lewis (4) contributed to the Tallawahs.

35 SIXES - SOUTH AFRICA vs WEST INDIES (T20Is)

The 34-sixes hit in the 2nd T20I between South Africa and West Indies in Centurion in 2023 remains the best tally in T20 internationals. West Indies managed a handsome 258/5 in 20 overs. Kyle Mayers slammed four sixes in his knock of 51. Johnson Charles hit a superb 118 from 46 balls. His knock had 11 sixes. Rovman Powell chipped in with two sixes in his 28. Shepherd managed four sixes in his 18-ball 41*. Odean Smith hit one six. Altogether, the Windies managed 22 sixes.

South Africa then chased down the 259-run target, scoring 259/4 in 18.5 overs despite hitting only 13 sixes. Quinton de Kock hit a 44-ball 100. He smashed 8 sixes. Reeza Hendricks and Riley Rossouw hit two sixes each in scores of 68 and 16, respectively. Aiden Markram hit one-six in his unbeaten 34 from 21 balls. ■

FEATURE

DECODING BATTERS WITH MOST IPL SIXES AS ANDRE RUSSELL ENTERS RECORD BOOKS

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Andre Russell entered the Indian Premier League's record books on Saturday after a magnificent knock against Sunrisers Hyderabad in match number 3 at Eden Gardens in Kolkata. Russell spanked a total of seven sixes and three fours in a 25-ball 64*. His blitz...

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BY CT CONTRIBUTOR

Here, we analyse batters with the most IPL sixes.

Andre Russell entered the Indian Premier League's record books on Saturday after a magnificent knock against Sunrisers Hyderabad in match number 3 at Eden Gardens in Kolkata. Russell spanked a total of seven sixes and three fours in a 25-ball 64*. His blitz helped Kolkata Knight Riders manage 208/7 in 20 overs. He shared a record 81-run stand for the 7th wicket alongside Rinku Singh. SRH pushed until the end, but Heinrich Klaasen's masterful 63 wasn't enough in a four-run defeat. Russell's seven sixes took him to 200 IPL maximums as he became the latest entrant in an exclusive club. Russell reached the mark in 97 innings. As a game veteran, we have all become accustomed to Russell and his explosiveness.

CHRIS GAYLE

Gayle played 142 matches in the IPL and remains the top customer regarding six-hitting. Former West Indies ace Gayle owns 357 IPL sixes. He is the only player in the competition's history to smash 300-plus maximums. Gayle achieved the mark in 141 innings. He smacked 4965 runs at 39.72 and carried a strike rate of 148.96. Gayle is also the highest six-hitter in the 20-over format. He owns 1056 sixes. His tally of 14562 runs remains the highest.

ROHIT SHARMA

Mumbai Indians ace Rohit Sharma is second in the list. Rohit has smashed a tally of 257 sixes in the global league. Former Deccan Chargers batter Rohit, who led Mumbai to five IPL titles, is the most successful Indian

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regarding IPL sixes. He owns 6211 runs at 29.57 and has a strike rate of 130.04. Overall, the veteran Indian skipper has smashed 487 sixes in the 20-over format. Rohit currently owns 11156 runs.

AB DE VILLIERS

Former DC and RCB legend AB de Villiers consistently bossed the IPL. De Villiers remains third on the list with 251 sixes in the IPL. He achieved the mark in 170 innings. He scored 5162 runs at 39.7 and carried a strike rate worth 151.68. In the 20-over format, ABD managed 436 sixes, scoring 9424 runs. De Villiers, known as Mr 360, had tremendous calibre in the format.

MS DHONI

Veteran MS Dhoni is next with a total of 239 IPL maximums. CSK legend Dhoni, who spent 2 seasons with the Rising Pune Supergiant, has taken 218 innings for his 239 sixes. He owns 5082 IPL runs at 38.79. His strike rate reads 135.91. Dhoni owns 7271 runs in the 20-over format and has smashed 325 sixes.

VIRAT KOHLI

Virat Kohli has been IPL's best batter since the league's inception in 2008. He scored the most runs in IPL history with 7284 under his belt at 37.16. His strike rate reads 129.93. Kohli has smashed 235 sixes from 230 innings. In RCB's opener against CSK, Kohli became the first Indian to smash 12000 runs in the 20-over format. He has hit 372 sixes in total.

DAVID WARNER

IPL's best foreign player, David Warner, is sixth in terms of IPL sixes. He owns a tally of 228 maximums from 177 innings. Warner has smoked 6426 IPL runs at 41.15. His strike rate reads a decent 139.90. In the 20-over format, the southpaw has clobbered 436 sixes. He owns 12094 runs at 37.09, and his strike rate

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reads 140.17.

KIERON POLLARD

Former Mumbai Indians hero Kieron Pollard is known for his monstrous sixes. Pollard went on to celebrate 223 maximums in the IPL from 171 innings. He scored a total of 3412 runs at 28.67. His strike rate reads 147.32. In the 20-over format, West Indies legend Pollard has smashed the second-most sixes after Gayle. He owns a total of 860 maximums, having scored 12900 runs at 31.46. His strike rate of 150.98 is truly sensational.

SURESH RAINA

Former Chennai Super Kings and Gujarat Lions ace Suresh Raina wildly succeeded in the premier competition. Raina hit 203 sixes from 200 IPL innings. He scored 5528 runs at 32.51 and carried a strike rate worth 136.73. In the 20-over format, Raina made his presence felt with 8654 runs at an average of 32.17 and a strike rate of 137.45. Raina ended his career with a total of 325 sixes.

ANDRE RUSSELL

KKR stalwart Russell is someone whose power defines his brilliance on the field. Having been a veteran in the format, Russell reached 200 sixes in the abovementioned competition from 97 innings. 197 of his sixes have come for KKR. Russell owns 2326 runs at 29.82. His strike rate of 175.54 is the best in the format. In 20 overs of cricket, Russell has spanked 675 sixes. He owns 8273 runs at 27.39. His strike rate is a phenomenal 169.87.

Shane Watson completes the top 10 in terms of most IPL sixes. Former RR, RCB and CSK ace Watson smashed 190 maximums from 141 innings. His strike rate was 137.91. ■

FEATURE

8 BATTERS WITH MOST T20 FIFTY-PLUS SCORES

Virat Kohli has been a stupendous batter across formats in cricket, and his dominance is pretty lethal. In match number six of the Indian Premier League (IPL) 2024 season, Kohli scored an authoritative 77 from 49 balls to help the Royal Challengers Bangalore...

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BY CT CONTRIBUTOR

Virat Kohli has been a stupendous batter across formats in cricket, and his dominance is pretty lethal. In match number six of the Indian Premier League (IPL) 2024 season, Kohli scored an authoritative 77 from 49 balls to help the Royal Challengers Bangalore beat Punjab Kings by four wickets at the M Chinnaswamy Stadium in Bengaluru on Monday. Kohli smashed 11 fours and two sixes, striking at 157.14. Punjab managed 176/6 before RCB scored 178/6. This was RCB's maiden win after they suffered a defeat in their opener against Chennai Super Kings. Kohli, who is the top scorer in IPL history, raced to his 51st fifty. He also owns 7 centuries in the cash-rich league.

In T20 cricket, Kohli attained a new milestone. He became the third batter after Chris Gayle and

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David Warner to smash 100 fifty-plus scores or more. It's indeed a unique feat for the 35-year-old Indian batting ace.

On the same note, we present the list of batters with the most 50-plus scores in T20s.

CHRIS GAYLE

Legendary T20 ace Chris Gayle bossed the show in this format, enjoying a dominating career from 2005 to 2022. The West Indian powerhouse was a household name across several T20 leagues, including the IPL. He also made his presence felt for the West Indies cricket team in T20I internationals. Gayle played 463 T20 matches overall and smacked 110 fifty-plus scores. His feat included 88 half-centuries and 22 centuries. Gayle scored a whopping 14562 runs in T20s at 36.22 and had a strike rate worth 144.75.

DAVID WARNER

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Australian supremo David Warner is second on the list in terms of 50-plus scorers in the 20-over format. Warner has 109 fifty-plus scores overall. His tally includes 101 fifties and 8 tons. He became the first player in T20 history with 100-plus fifties. Warner owns 12094 runs at 37.09. His strike rate is a commendable 140.17. Warner remains the highest scorer among foreigners in the IPL and has the record for most fifties in the competition's history.

VIRAT KOHLI

As mentioned, India's Kohli joined Gayle and Warner in this exclusive list. Kohli is a multi-dimensional all-format player with 92 fifties and 8 tons under his belt. He achieved the milestone in his 378th match (361 innings). Kohli has smashed a total of 12092 runs in T20s at 41.26. His strike rate is 133.49. 7361 of his runs have come in the IPL at 37.36. Notably, Kohli is the only player in the T20Is with 4000-plus runs. He has 4037 runs under his belt.

BABAR AZAM

Pakistan cricket team sensation Babar Azam is next to Kohli for his prowess in today's game. Babar has a dream Pakistan Super League 2024 season and is fourth on the list. Babar has managed 98 fifty-plus scores in T20 cricket. He has amassed 11 hundreds and 87 fifties so far from 280 innings. He is in line to be the fastest to 100 fifty-plus scores in T20s. Babar has 10495 runs at 44.28. His strike rate is 129.32. He is the leading scorer in the PSL with over 3500 runs. He is also the 3rd-highest scorer in T20Is after Kohli and Rohit Sharma with 3698 runs.

JOS BUTTLER

England's Jos Buttler is another T20 specialist and an IPL ace. Buttler, who is representing the Rajasthan Royals in the IPL, has 86 scores of fifty-plus in T20s. His tally includes 80 fifties and six hundreds. In 404

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matches (381 innings), the senior Englishman has smashed 11157 runs at an average of 34.54. His strike rate is 144.67. In 97 IPL matches, Buttler has 3234 runs. Buttler is also England's top scorer in T20Is. He owns a total of 2927 runs at 34.84.

AARON FINCH

Australia's 2021 ICC T20 World Cup-winning skipper Aaron Finch follows Buttler on the list. Finch has played 387 matches, scoring 11458 runs at 33.60. His strike rate is 138.16. Finch has 85 fifty-plus scores in T20s. His tally includes 8 tons and 77 fifties. He is Australia's highest scorer in T20Is with 3120 runs. He retired from international duty back in 2022. Finch was last seen in the BBL 2023-24 season as he called it curtains to an impressive career.

ALEX HALES

Alex Hales has been an able customer in the T20 format, making his presence felt globally. Having made his T20 debut in 2009, Hales has enjoyed a 15-year-old career. In 449 matches, the Englishman has smashed 12319 runs at 29.68. His strike rate is 146.39. Hales owns 84 fifty-plus scores in T20 cricket. His tally includes 78 fifties and six tons. Hales is one of the three England players to have smashed 2000-plus runs in T20s.

SHOAIB MALIK

Shoaib Malik is still going strong at over 42 years of age. He has been there since 2005. A veteran of 542 matches (503 innings), former Pakistan ace Malik has scored 13360 runs in T20 cricket at 36.40. His strike rate is 127.56. Malik has so far amassed 83 fifty-plus scores. Interestingly, he has yet to smash a T20 ton. He has hit 83 fifties. Malik was recently seen in the PSL 2024 season. Before that, he played in the Bangladesh Premier League. ■

FEATURE

4 REASONS WHY IPL NEEDS MORE EXCITING RULES

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Cricket, with its peculiarities and charm, often finds itself in a delicate dance between tradition and innovation. The Indian Premier League (IPL), known for its boundary-pushing approach to the game, epitomizes this blend perfectly. However, as we dive...

BY CT CONTRIBUTOR

"Cricket is a game that owes much of its unique appeal to the fact that it should be played not only within its Laws but also within the Spirit of the Game. Any action, which is seen to abuse this spirit, causes injury to the game itself." — Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC) Cricket, with its peculiarities and charm, often finds itself in a delicate dance between tradition and innovation. The Indian Premier League (IPL), known for its boundary-pushing approach to the game, epitomizes this blend perfectly. However, as we dive deeper into 2024, it's time to add a dash of spice to the IPL concoction with some fresh rules. As the saying goes, "In cricket, as in life, it's all about the unexpected twists and turns." With that playful spirit in mind, let's explore why the IPL needs a sprinkle of excitement in its rulebook.

The IPL, affectionately dubbed cricket's carnival, has thrilled audiences worldwide with its blend of athleticism, drama, and star power. Yet, to keep the cricketing carnival vibrant and captivating, it's imperative to infuse it with new and exhilarating rules. As we embark on this journey, let's uncover five compelling reasons why the IPL needs to embrace more exciting rules. From enhancing competition to igniting fan engagement, these changes promise to take the IPL experience to dizzying new heights. So, buckle

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up, cricket enthusiasts, as we delve into the realm of innovation and excitement in the world's most electrifying cricket league!

ENHANCED COMPETITION

Cricket thrives on competition, and the IPL is no exception. Injecting new rules into the tournament can invigorate the spirit of competition, levelling the playing field and fostering intense rivalries. Allowing bowlers to deliver two bouncers per over, for instance, adds a fresh dimension to the game, challenging batsmen and giving bowlers more opportunities to assert their dominance. Additionally, innovative powerplay strategies or dynamic player rotations can keep teams on their toes, preventing complacency and ensuring that every match is a closely contested battle. By embracing new rules that promote competitiveness, the IPL can elevate the standard of cricket and deliver edge-of-the-seat entertainment for fans worldwide.

COMMUNITY BUILDING

Cricket serves as a cultural glue, uniting diverse communities under the banner of sportsmanship and camaraderie. In the context of the IPL, fostering a sense of community goes beyond mere fan engagement; it's about nurturing a collective identity that resonates with supporters on a personal level. Introducing initiatives that promote grassroots cricket development or hosting interactive events where fans can meet players and participate in charitable activities can strengthen the bond between teams and their communities. Additionally, implementing neighbourhood cricket tournaments or organizing outreach programs in underserved areas can extend the IPL's reach beyond the boundaries of the stadium, creating lasting connections and leaving a positive impact on society. By prioritizing community-building initiatives, the IPL can harness the power of cricket to inspire and uplift communities, making it more than just a sporting event but a force for social change and unity.

TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCEMENTS

In today's digital age, technological innovations have become integral to the evolution of sports, and cricket is no exception. The IPL has a prime opportunity to leverage cutting-edge technology to enhance the viewing experience and ensure fair play on the field. Introducing advanced tools like ball-tracking systems

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and virtual reality simulations can provide fans with immersive insights into the game, allowing them to analyze every delivery and strategic move in real-time. Moreover, incorporating artificial intelligence and machine learning algorithms can assist umpires in making accurate decisions, reducing human error and controversy. By embracing technological advancements, the IPL can not only elevate the standard of cricket but also attract a tech-savvy audience eager to witness the marriage of sports and innovation. From augmented reality overlays to interactive fan experiences, the possibilities are endless, and the IPL must seize this opportunity to stay at the forefront of sports technology and entertainment.

INNOVATION AND CREATIVITY

At its core, the IPL is a platform for pushing the boundaries of conventional cricket and embracing innovation and creativity. Introducing exciting new rules is an opportunity to inject fresh energy into the game and captivate audiences with unexpected twists and turns. Whether it's experimenting with formats like introducing a mini-over powerplay or implementing unique player transfer mechanisms, the IPL has the potential to redefine the way cricket is played and experienced. Moreover, fostering a culture of creativity extends beyond the rules of the game; it's about encouraging teams to think outside the box, from marketing strategies to fan engagement initiatives. By embracing innovation and creativity, the IPL can continue to captivate audiences and remain a trailblazer in the world of sports entertainment. As the saying goes, "Innovation distinguishes between a leader and a follower," and the IPL has the opportunity to lead the way in shaping the future of cricket.

As we bid adieu to this rollercoaster ride through the world of IPL rule innovations, one thing is clear: cricket isn't just a game; it's a wild adventure filled with twists, turns, and the occasional googly. By embracing more exciting rules, the IPL isn't just raising the stakes; it's creating a cricketing circus that keeps fans on the edge of their seats and players on their toes. So, here's to more bouncers, more boundaries, and more banter—because in the IPL, the only thing predictable is its unpredictability! Let's keep the fun rolling and the sixes flying! ■

FEATURE

RISING STARS OF IPL 2024: 10 YOUNG GUNS SET TO DOMINATE THE FIELD

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As the anticipation builds for another exhilarating season of the Indian Premier League (IPL), cricket enthusiasts around the globe eagerly await the emergence of new talents who will light up the tournament with their brilliance. In IPL 2024, the spotlight...

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BY CT CONTRIBUTOR

As the anticipation builds for another exhilarating season of the Indian Premier League (IPL), cricket enthusiasts around the globe eagerly await the emergence of new talents who will light up the tournament with their brilliance. In IPL 2024, the spotlight shines on 10 promising youngsters from various franchises, each poised to make a significant impact on the grand stage of T20 cricket. From explosive batsmen to fiery pacers and dynamic all-rounders, these young guns embody the future of the sport. With hefty price tags, impressive performances in previous seasons, or untapped potential, these players have captured the attention of fans and pundits alike. As they prepare to showcase their skills and carve out their place in the annals of cricketing history, let's delve into the stories of these rising stars who are ready to set the IPL stage ablaze with their talent and determination.

1. SAMEER RIZVI (CSK)

Sameer Rizvi's acquisition by Chennai Super Kings for a hefty 8.4 crores speaks volumes about his potential. As a dynamic player, Rizvi possesses the skills to turn the tide in CSK's favor. Known for his aggressive batting style and sharp fielding, he adds depth to the team's roster. CSK fans eagerly anticipate Rizvi's debut, hoping he will justify his price tag with match-winning performances on the field.

2. HARSHIT RANA (KKR)

Harshit Rana's exceptional performance in the previous season has set high expectations for him in IPL 2024. Renowned for his express pace and accuracy, Rana is a vital asset for Kolkata Knight Riders' bowling lineup. His ability to generate bounce and movement makes him a nightmare for opposing batsmen. KKR supporters eagerly anticipate Rana's fiery spells, hoping he will spearhead their team's

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bowling attack and deliver crucial breakthroughs in crucial moments of the game.

3. OMARZAI (GT)

Despite being acquired by Gujarat Titans for a modest 50 lakhs, Omarzai's potential as an all-rounder makes him a valuable addition to the team. His ability to contribute with both bat and ball adds depth to GT's squad. With a knack for turning the game in his team's favor, Omarzai is expected to play a pivotal role in Gujarat Titans' campaign in IPL 2024. GT fans are optimistic that Omarzai will exceed expectations and emerge as one of the standout performers of the season.

4. SHAMAR JOSEPH (LSG)

Shamar Joseph's inclusion in the Lucknow Super Giants squad adds a new dimension to their bowling attack. Hailing from the West Indies, Joseph is known for his raw pace and ability to generate bounce on any surface. His aggressive approach and knack for picking up wickets make him a formidable force on the field. LSG fans are excited to witness Joseph's fiery spells, hoping he will play a crucial role in their team's quest for glory in IPL 2024.

5. SHUBHAM DUBEY (RR)

Rajasthan Royals' acquisition of Shubham Dubey for 5.8 crores highlights their faith in his batting prowess. A reliable middle-order batsman, Dubey can anchor the innings and accelerate when needed. His sound technique and aggressive stroke play make him a valuable asset for RR. With high expectations riding on his shoulders, Dubey is poised to make a significant impact in IPL 2024. RR supporters eagerly await his contributions, hoping he will play a key role in their team's success in the tournament.

6. ANUJ RAWAT (RCB)

Anuj Rawat's inclusion in the Royal Challengers Bangalore squad adds depth to their batting lineup. As an explosive wicketkeeper-batsman, Rawat brings flair and aggression to RCB's middle order. His ability to score quick runs and keep wickets efficiently makes him a versatile player. With years of experience in domestic cricket, Rawat is ready to make his mark on the IPL stage. RCB fans eagerly anticipate Rawat's performances, hoping he will play a pivotal role in their team's quest for the title in IPL 2024.

7. NUWAN THUSHARA (MI)

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Mumbai Indians' acquisition of Nuwan Thushara in the auction raised eyebrows, as he is touted as the next Lasith Malinga. With a unique sling action and the ability to generate pace, Thushara poses a threat to any batting lineup. His knack for picking up crucial wickets in the death overs makes him a valuable asset for MI. With the legacy of Malinga to live up to, Thushara is eager to make a name for himself in IPL 2024. MI fans eagerly await his performances, hoping he will emulate Malinga's success and play a key role in their team's campaign.

8. KUMAR KUSHAGRA (DC)

At just 19 years old, Kumar Kushagra's acquisition by Delhi Capitals for a whopping 7.2 crores reflects his immense potential. As a talented wicketkeeper-batsman, Kushagra adds depth to DC's squad. His ability to score quick runs and keep wickets efficiently makes him a valuable asset for the team. With youth on his side and a hunger for success, Kushagra is ready to make a mark in IPL 2024. DC fans eagerly await his debut, hoping he will justify his price tag with match-winning performances on the field.

9. PRABHSIMRAN SINGH (PBKS)

Prabhsimran Singh's explosive batting performances for Punjab Kings in the previous season have raised expectations for him in IPL 2024. As a dashing opener, Singh can take the game away from the opposition with his aggressive stroke play. His fearless approach and ability to score quick runs make him a vital asset for PBKS. With the experience of a successful season behind him, Singh is poised to make a significant impact in IPL 2024. PBKS supporters eagerly anticipate his contributions, hoping he will play a key role in their team's success in the tournament.

10. SHAHBAZ AHMED (SRH)

Shahbaz Ahmed's acquisition by Sunrisers Hyderabad through a trade with RCB has sparked excitement among SRH fans. In comparison to Washington Sundar, Ahmed is known for his all-around abilities. Whether with bat or ball, Ahmed has the knack for making crucial contributions to his team's cause. His versatility adds depth to SRH's squad, and fans are eager to see him in action in IPL 2024. With expectations riding high, Ahmed is determined to showcase his talent on the grand stage and help SRH achieve glory in the tournament. ■

SOCIAL BUZZ

facebook

Mohammad Shami

Miss you GT Family - Mohammad Shami

Rishabh Pant

Ready to conquer every challenge that comes my way - Shikhar Dhawan

Shikhar Dhawan

Ready to conquer every challenge that comes my way - Shikhar Dhawan

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instagram

mayankagarawal

Don ko pakadna mumkin hai aur baat karna bhi

deepak_chahar9

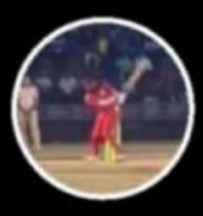
Cigar is missing I think...rest all looks vintage excluding both of us

chennaiipl

Stepping out for the first travel of the year!

WATCH CRICKETTODAY INSTAGRAM REELS

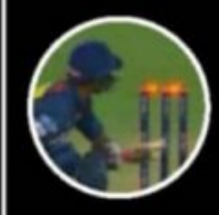
UNPLAYABLE INSWING YORKER



NO LOOK HUGE SIX

HEAD BREAKING BEAMER

SENSATIONAL CAUGHT & BOWLED IN IPL



MOST UNLUCKY DISMISSALS IN IPL HISTORY

ROHIT SHARMA'S STYLISH PULL SHOTS IN IPL

twitter

@MichaelVaughan

"Impossible for @RCBTweets to win the IPL with this bowling attack"

@IrfanPathan

"Faf should have bowled maxwell in the power play. KKr did bowl Anukul in power play"

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@bhogleharsha

"He's been here since 2012 but you still want Sunil Narine in your team everyday"

@cricketaakash

"Home Run Ends. KKR's extends their winning-streak at Bengaluru though"

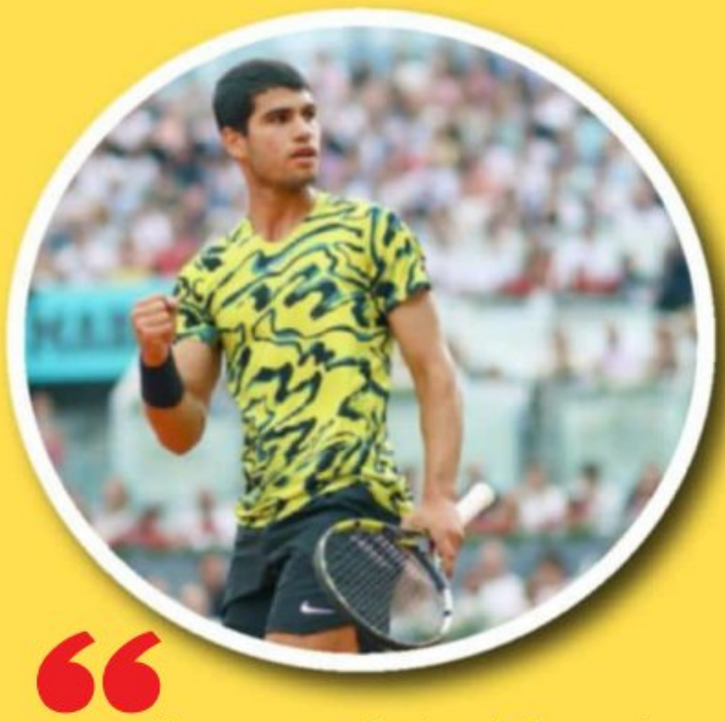
@JunaidkhanREAL

"Riyan Parag is looking completely different this season"

@YUVSTRONG12

"Waah sir Abhishek waah..great innings but what a splendid shot to get out on"

TOP STORIES



"I have a lot of frustrations right now because he made me feel like I'm 13 years old"

- Carlos Alcaraz on his defeat against Grigor Dimitrov

"Our on-court chemistry had its ups and downs but our friendship was always rock solid"

- Novak Djokovic on ending his association with coach Goran Ivanisevic

SANDRO TONALI CHARGED BY ENGLISH FA

Newcastle midfielder Sandro Tonali has been charged with breaching English soccer's betting rules, the Football Association said. Tonali is already serving a 10-month ban issued by the Italian soccer federation for betting on teams he played for, which has ruled him out of action since October. He could be in more trouble after the FA said he breached its rules on 50 occasions by allegedly placing bets on matches from Aug. 12 to Oct. 12 last year. On Oct. 12, Tonali was sent home from Italy's training camp after being notified by police of his involvement in a betting investigation. The 23-year-old Tonali joined Newcastle from AC Milan last July for a fee reportedly worth up to 60 million pounds ($76.3 million). But he made only 12 appearances for the Premier League club after being caught up in a wider betting investigation that saw Juventus midfielder Nicolò Fagioli banned for seven months.

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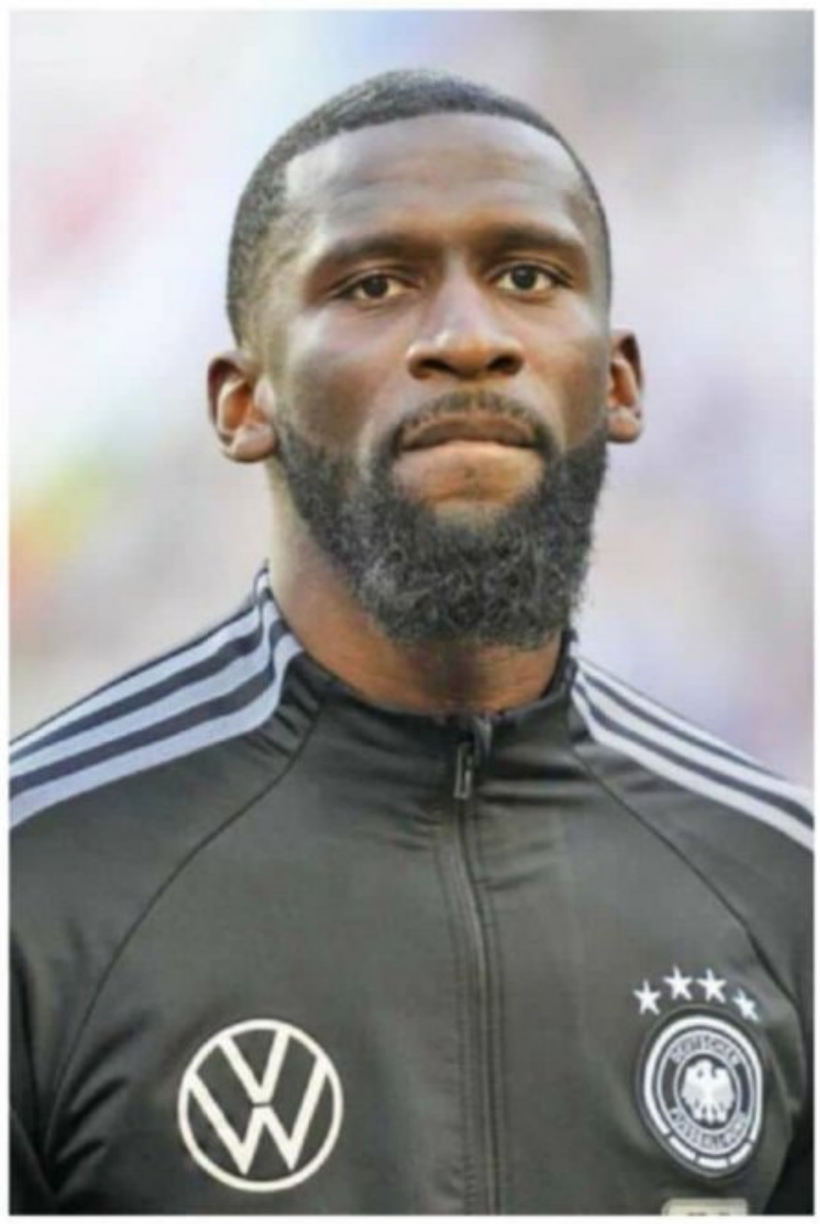

ACCUSATION OF TERROR SUPPORT

Germany defender Antonio Rüdiger and the German soccer federation are taking legal action against a disgraced former tabloid editor for suggesting the player's Ramadan greeting was a show of support for terrorist group Islamic State. Rüdiger, a practicing Muslim, posted on Instagram a photo of himself in a white robe kneeling on a prayer mat while pointing upward with his right index finger. "Ramadan Mubarak to all Muslims around the world. May the almighty accept our fasting and prayers. #AlwaysBelieve," the Real Madrid player wrote. Former Bild chief editor Julian Reichelt responded on X, formerly Twitter, with a series of posts accusing the player of "Islamism" and of showing the "ISIS-greeting of Islamists," using another term to refer to Islamic State.

NO PUNISHMENT FOR RACIAL ABUSE

Inter Milan defender Francesco Acerbi will not face sanctions for allegedly racially abusing Napoli's Juan Jesus in a Serie A match because there wasn't enough proof. The alleged incident on March 17 was revealed when Juan Jesus told the referee Acerbi directed a racial slur at him. Acerbi has repeatedly denied he used the offensive word. The Italian soccer federation prosecutor questioned the players and witnesses last week. He reported to the Italian league sporting judge, who also studied images from the match, as well as audio from the referee and VAR, before announcing the decision. Gerardo Mastrandrea said in a lengthy statement that while it was clear Acerbi insulted Juan Jesus, the "minimum level of reasonable certainty" had not been reached that it was of a racial nature.

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SUSPENDION FOR 2 YEARS IN DOPING FRAUD CASE

Brazilian striker Gabriel Barbosa was suspended for two years following a doping fraud investigation. The country's Anti-Doping Sports Court of Justice voted 5-4 to punish Barbosa to April 2025. He brought attention to himself by his erratic behavior during a surprise test on April 8, 2023, one day before Flamengo played the Rio de Janeiro state championship. Anti-doping officers who came to test players at the club training ground were largely ignored by Barbosa, who took his test hours after his teammates. Barbosa's lawyers argued his blood test at the time, which is considered a more effective test, proved he was clean, and added his unfriendly behavior toward the officers did not mean he tricked the test.

INSENSITIVE AND HURTFUL POSTS

Korbin Albert, a midfielder for the U.S. women's national team, apologized for having liked and shared social media posts that she described as "offensive, insensitive and hurtful." The 20-year-old Albert, who plays for Paris Saint-Germain, had reportedly reposted anti-LGBTQ+ content on her TikTok account. "I want to sincerely apologize for my actions on social media," Albert wrote on her Instagram story. "Liking and sharing posts that are offensive, insensitive and hurtful was immature and disrespectful which was never my intent." According to multiple media outlets, Albert shared a video from a Christian sermon that described being gay and "feeling transgender" as wrong. Albert's apology came shortly after PSG's 3-0 win over Häcken in the Women's Champions League quarterfinals — she scored in the game — and followed criticism from recently retired U.S. star Megan Rapinoe.

FEATURE

FIA PRESIDENT DEFENDS LEADERSHIP

In a letter sent to FIA membership, a copy of which was seen by The Associated Press, Mohammed Ben Sulayem said the complaints have "shaken the FIA" and created a "period of unprecedented turbulence and challenge...

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BY STAFF WRITER

The head of Formula 1's governing body has issued a passionate defense of his leadership, claiming a pair of whistleblower complaints against him were meant to "destabilize me as President of the FIA, but also of questioning the integrity of our respected organization." In a letter sent to FIA membership, a copy of which was seen by The Associated Press, Mohammed Ben Sulayem said the complaints have "shaken the FIA" and created a "period of unprecedented turbulence and challenge."

The ethics committee for the FIA earlier this week cleared Ben Sulayem after an investigation it said lasted 30 days and included interviewing 11 witnesses, including the president.

The FIA had said its compliance officer received two complaints against Ben Sulayem. The first alleged he intervened to overturn a penalty given to Fernando Alonso at last year's Saudi Arabian Grand Prix. The second, from the same whistleblower, claimed Ben Sulayem told officials not to certify the Las Vegas circuit for its high-profile race last November.

"These events have unfolded with one clear objective: to target the very heart of our leadership and undermine the foundation of our federation," Ben Sulayem wrote to the FIA members. F1 this weekend is in Australia for the third race of the season.

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Ben Sulayem was elected president in December of 2021 and is the first Muslim to run the FIA, which is comprised of 242 motoring and motor sport club members in 147 countries. It oversees F1 among other entities and tensions between the two have been particularly tense of late. The leadership of Ben Sulayem has been questioned during his entire time at the helm. He tried to enforce a ban on drivers wearing jewelry in their cars, which seven-time champion Lewis Hamilton rebuked and showed up at a 2022 news conference wearing every necklace, watch, bracelet and ring he had with him in Miami.

The FIA also tried to issue a ban on drivers making political statements. Although many pushed back on that Hamilton said he outright refused to be silenced and even this week called for a ceasefire in the war between Israel and Palestine.

Asked Thursday in Melbourne if Ben Sulayem had Hamilton's support as president, the Mercedes driver said "never has."

Hours after Ben Sulayem was cleared by the ethics committee, Susie Wolff announced she had filed a criminal complaint in France against Paris-based FIA over its brief December conflict of interest investigation into her.

Susie Wolff, who is the head of F1's all-female F1 Academy, was accused of sharing confidential information with her husband, Mercedes team boss Toto Wolff. The Wolffs denied any wrongdoing, and the other nine F1 teams released identically worded statement denying they'd complained about the Wolffs.

The FIA has also been hands-off in the saga at Red Bull Racing, where an employee accused team principal Christian Horner of misconduct. Red Bull's parent company investigated Horner and ultimately cleared him while also suspending the accuser.

The employee has since hired a communications firm, appealed Red Bull's findings to the parent company and lodged a complaint to either the FIA's ethics or compliance committees. Both bodies operate independently from the FIA.

The FIA has refused to comment on whether it is investigating Horner. F1 is not conducting its own investigation into Red Bull, saying that is the job of the governing body.

All the off-track drama has completely overshadowed the start of the season. Red Bull went 1-2 in the first two races and three-time reigning world champion Max Verstappen has won 19 of the last 20 races. In his letter, Ben Sulayem wrote that he was annoyed that the FIA has "fallen victim to malicious leaks of confidential and sensitive information, tarnishing our reputation and causing concern among our members."

"Yet, despite these attacks aimed at my character and our organization as a whole, we have emerged stronger and more resolute than ever," he wrote. "We know that the ultimate goal of these reprehensible acts was to target me and to weaken the very essence of the FIA.

He added that he is committed to "an environment of transparency, accountability and unwavering integrity within the FIA." He closed the letter by insisting he remains "steadfast in my dedication" as president of the FIA. ■

FEATURE

FRANCE BEATABLE, GERMANY RESURGENT, ITALY SEEKING REDEMPTION: THE STATE OF PLAY AHEAD OF EURO 2024

The 24-team lineup for the European Championship is complete after Poland, Ukraine and Georgia became the final teams to qualify for the tournament in Germany...

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BY STAFF WRITER

The 24-team lineup for the European Championship is complete after Poland, Ukraine and Georgia became the final teams to qualify for the tournament in Germany. Here's a look at the how the favorites, title outsiders and underdogs stack up with less than 80 days to go until the opening game:

THE FAVORITES

France will likely go into the tournament as the favorite, given its status as the leading European team in the FIFA ranking — at No. 2 — and having been the champion or runner-up at three of its last four major international tournaments. Fronted by Kylian Mbappé, the French squad remains deep and will be motivated by its loss in the World Cup final in Qatar. Similarly, No. 3-ranked England has regrets after losing the title match against Italy at the last Euros in 2021 and has its strongest pool of players for 20 years, with Jude Bellingham now a star at Real Madrid. Over the recent international break, France lost soundly to Germany and England was defeated by Brazil, underlining their vulnerability and showing that perhaps there's no overwhelming favorite at the Euros. Belgium has lost some of its luster and will be concerned by the absence of goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois and the persistent injury issues of Kevin De Bruyne. Portugal, meanwhile, has so much talent in his squad and was the only team to qualify with a flawless record, albeit from a weak group. At 39, can Cristiano Ronaldo win the Euros for a second time?

THE HOST NATION

Never write off Germany. After a miserable 2023 ended with friendly losses to Turkey and Austria, the Euro 2024 host kicked off this year by beating France and the Netherlands over the last week. Former Bayern Munich coach Julian Nagelsmann seems to have Germany ticking again with help from Real Madrid midfielder Toni Kroos, who was back in the German lineup for the first time since the last Euros in 2021. Bayer Leverkusen's 20-year-old attacking midfielder Florian Wirtz set a record with his goal just seven seconds into the win over France. Germany will have something to prove as host. Group-stage exits at the last two World Cups and a round-of-16 loss to England at the last Euros mean Germany has won just three of its last 10 games at major tournaments. Facing Scotland, Hungary and Switzerland in the group stage at Euro 2024 seems a relatively kind draw.

THE DEFENDING CHAMPS

There is a familiar feel to Italy seeking redemption at the European Championship after failing to qualify for the previous World Cup. However, the defending European champion has faced more upheaval over the

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past year with coach Roberto Mancini quitting and key player Sandro Tonali banned for gambling. While there is no doubting new coach Luciano Spalletti's credentials after he led Napoli to its first league title in more than three decades last season, there are some question marks about the talent he has at his disposal. There have been positive signs as Spalletti appears to have Italy playing the type of entertaining soccer he delivered at Napoli, but the Azzurri still have problems in attack. Lazio forward Ciro Immobile was dropped by Spalletti after struggling with form, as was Atalanta's Gianluca Scamacca. That means an Argentina-born player could be leading the way for Italy in Germany. Mateo Retegui spent his entire playing career in the South American country before moving to Genoa this season. He has Italian citizenship through his maternal grandmother.

THE TITLE OUTSIDERS

The European Championship has produced previous surprise winners in a way the World Cup has not. Denmark won in 1992 after the players came back from vacation when the team was put into the tournament as a late replacement for Yugoslavia. Greece stunned the soccer world by taking the title in 2004. With 16 of 24 teams advancing to the knockout rounds in the current format, the chance to go on a hot streak is always there. In recent Euros, Austria and Turkey were fashionable dark horse picks, although they both flopped. Austria's 6-1 win over Turkey in a friendly on Tuesday suggests coach Ralf Rangnick has created a team of substance. Austria also caught the eye by scoring the fastest-ever international goal last week — through Christoph Baumgartner after six seconds at Euros-bound Slovakia. However, Austria is in a tough group with France, the Netherlands and Poland. The Dutch have a solid foundation for a title shot with a defense led by Virgil van Dijk. But that would require winning a Euros knockout game for the first time in 20 years. Switzerland also has the talent for a deep run and is in what looks like a relatively weak group aside from top-seeded Germany.

UKRAINE QUALIFIES

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When war-torn Ukraine beat Iceland 2-1 to qualify through the playoffs, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy was quick to issue a statement of congratulations on social media to highlight the significance of the achievement.

"Whenever Ukrainians face difficulties but do not give up and continue to fight, Ukrainians certainly win," Zelenskyy wrote.

Mykhailo Mudryk's 84th-minute goal secured a comeback win for Ukraine, its second dramatic victory in the space of a week after beating Bosnia-Herzegovina 2-1 in the semifinals on Thursday thanks to an 88th-minute goal from Girona striker Artem Dovbyk. The war has meant Ukraine has not been able to play national-team games at home for more than two years. All 18 games of Chelsea forward Mudryk's burgeoning international career have been played either away or at neutral venues. That doesn't mean Ukraine lacks fans. The war means many Ukrainians are living both in Poland — where Mudryk scored the winning goal against Iceland — and in Euro 2024 host nation Germany. The team can probably count on plenty of support from neutral fans at its games, too.

THE UNDERDOGS

Who else might the neutrals be rooting for at Euro 2024? How about Georgia, which will be the biggest underdog when the country making its debut at a major tournament after qualifying through the playoffs. It gives star forward Khvicha Kvaratskhelia — one of the best players in Europe over the past two seasons — an even bigger stage to shine. Georgia has been an independent nation since 1991 but has only recently started to emerge on the soccer scene. It now became the latest country to benefit from UEFA's decision to expand the Euros to 24 teams since 2016 and opening a path for a low-ranked team to rise to the big stage through results in the Nations League. Other underdogs to watch out for are Albania, appearing in only its second major tournament, and Scotland, whose tartan-wearing fans will be noticeable and whose team's run of impressive results under Steve Clarke has included a win over Spain. ■

FEATURE

BLACK COACHES ARE RARE IN SOCCER. IS THIS BECAUSE OF A LACK OF DIVERSITY IN THE BOARDROOM?

Ricky Hill packed his bags and prepared to uproot his life again. Next stop: Chicago. The former England international soccer player is accustomed to making sacrifices and traveling far to build his coaching career...

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BY STAFF WRITER

Ricky Hill packed his bags and prepared to uproot his life again. Next stop: Chicago. The former England international soccer player is accustomed to making sacrifices and traveling far to build his coaching career, an effort he says has been stymied because he is Black.

"It is something that I hate to do because home is where the heart is," Hill said of leaving behind his wife of 38 years and his 99-year-old mother to chase a rare management opportunity.

Racism has long permeated the world's most popular sport, with players subjected to racist chants and taunts online. While soccer governing bodies such as FIFA and UEFA have taken steps to combat the abuse of players, the lack of diversity in the upper ranks at major clubs remains an unsolved problem.

"It's two fights for equality," Hill told The Associated Press.

Hill — who as a teenager in the 1970s was among the first generation of Black players in England — says he routinely faced racist abuse from fans when he played for Luton Town.

"You would hear songs about you, see people spitting, that kind of vitriolic behavior."

That racism, he says, has continued to hold him back in the pursuit of his top-flight coaching dream.

"The difficulty we've had as racially diverse individuals and Black individuals, specifically, is there is no way of showing your worth as a coach or manager without actually having the opportunity to do so," he said.

The issue needs to be considered "through a Black lens," Delroy Corinaldi, co-founder of the British-based advocacy group Black Footballers Partnership, told The AP. A BFP report in 2022 found that while some 43% of players in England's Premier League are Black, only 4% land coaching jobs in English professional soccer. There are currently only two Black managers in the Premier League.

WIDER PROBLEM

Under-representation is not just an English problem. There are only two Black head coaches in France's Ligue 1, one in Italy's Serie A, and none in the top divisions of Spain and Germany. Wilfried Nancy, who is French, built his coaching career with Montreal in Canada and he now leads Ohio's championship-winning Columbus Crew. He is the only Black head coach in MLS. Nancy is puzzled by the lack of diversity in soccer coaching in Europe and the U.S. "A lot of

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people like me, we have a lot of competency, but they don't have the opportunity for the moment to do it," he said.

Hill is standing up to racism in the sport. In 2022, he sued MLS and the USL Championship claiming discrimination after repeatedly being overlooked for jobs despite his decorated coaching career with Tampa Bay Rowdies and in Trinidad and Tobago.

WHY IS THIS HAPPENING?

A lack of diversity in boardrooms may be the root of the problem. The Football Association in England launched a leadership diversity code in 2020, setting hiring targets to address inequality. Yet its most recent report in November said workforce representation still does not reflect the diversity of players. Of last season's hires, the report said, 9% of senior leaders, 11% of team operations, 16% of coaches and 9% of senior coaches were Black, Asian or of mixed heritage. FA chief executive Mark Bullingham admits there is "still a huge amount of work to be done." Burnley coach Vincent Kompany, who is Black, said this must be addressed to effect real change.

"If you have a boardroom that's diverse, you can't brush things under the carpet," Kompany said.

The Premier League's Coach Inclusion and Diversity Scheme aims to increase minority representation in coaching. The initiative provides coaches with a bursary and work placements. Yet the BFP's latest report found that non-Black former players are 50% more likely than their Black counterparts to progress into management in England, and Black managers or assistants are 41% more likely to be fired.

"They are less likely to get in. Once they get in they are less likely to get promoted. And once they do get promoted they are more likely to get fired," one of the report's authors, Stefan Szymanski, a professor of sport management at the University of Michigan, told AP. "I'd like to hear what an explanation of this is, other than racism."

TOP JOBS

Two of the biggest coaching jobs in soccer will become available at the end of the season. And while it is not yet clear who will fill the positions at Liverpool and Bayern Munich, it's highly unlikely the successful candidates will be Black. The standout favorite is Xabi Alonso, who is less than two years into his first job as head coach with Bayer Leverkusen. Alonso, who is white, had a distinguished playing career with Liverpool, Real Madrid and Bayern, and Bayer is on course to win the German title this season.

"You have to be fair. Who's qualified to do that job?" former Premier League player Troy Deeney told AP. "Part of the argument isn't to just say, 'Give Black people, women, whoever you think is marginalized, just give them the job.' Who's the Black manager that's doing really well at the moment that deserves that job?"

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Ruud Gullit, then one of the most celebrated players in the world, became the Premier League's first Black manager when he was appointed by Chelsea in 1996. Multiple Champions League-winner Clarence Seedorf was hired by Italian giant AC Milan in 2014. He lasted only four months. But high-profile Black players are more commonly hired as coaches to low-level teams. Former England internationals Paul Ince and Sol Campbell began their managerial careers with then-fourth division team Macclesfield. Ince's only top-flight job was with Blackburn in 2008. He was fired after less than six months and has not been hired by a Premier League club since. Meanwhile, Campbell's ex-England teammate, Frank Lampard, who is white, has held three Premier League coaching positions on the back of his one year at second division Derby. Deeney was hired as head coach of fourth-tier Forest Green Rovers in December, but was fired less than a month later. He remains determined.

"If the reports coming out are suggesting the scale is tipped not in my favor, it doesn't mean I don't play the game. It just means I've got to play the game harder than everybody else," he said.

Hill had a four-month spell as manager of Luton, then in the third tier of English soccer, and has struggled to find work in England ever since. He has just taken a position as executive director of Evolution Soccer in suburban Chicago.

"The industry is such that everyone wants to stay in it and only a certain number of people can," he said. "But, disproportionately, Black people do not manage to stay within the game at a far greater rate than anyone else."

A POSSIBLE SOLUTION

Inspiration could be drawn from the U.S., where the formerly white-dominated NFL implemented rules to try to level the playing field for people of color seeking positions as head coaches, general managers and executives. The Rooney Rule requires teams to interview at least one person of color for a head coach position, and if any team loses a minority coach or executive to another team, it is awarded compensatory picks in upcoming drafts.

THE SYSTEM HAS PAID OFF.

In the NFL, four minority head coaches have been hired this year and there's a record nine coaches of color entering the 2024 season. A similar scheme was adopted by England soccer's lower divisions in 2019, but statistics show diversity remains an issue. Last week, the government introduced legislation to create an independent regulator in English soccer. Szymanski said this could push clubs to commit to diversity where FA and Premier League incentives have failed.

"I would say voluntary arrangements have shown themselves not to be satisfactory," he said. "You need some kind of regulation to push the clubs to embrace change." ■

FIND SIX DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THESE TWO PICTURES

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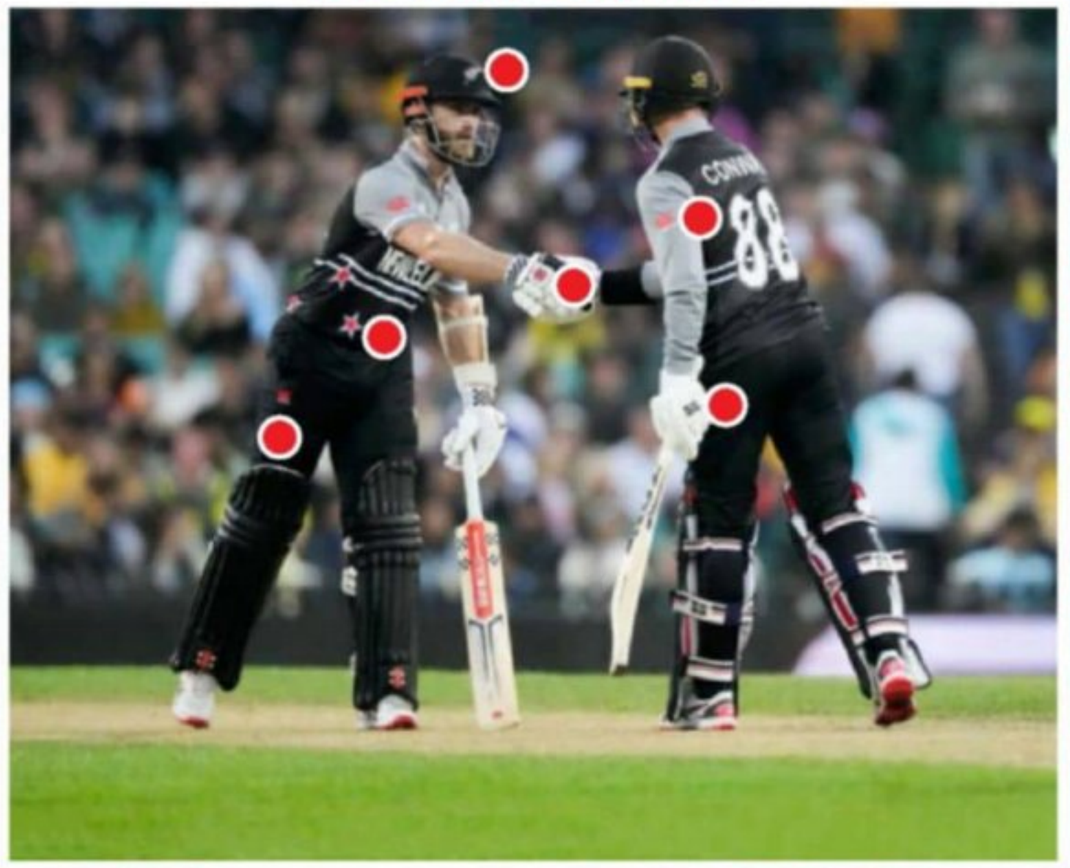

Last months's winners: Deepak (Delhi), Neeraj (Noida), Sunil (Gurugram)